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COLLECTIVE FARM UNION AT THE CROSSROADS

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The pro's and con's of creating collective farm unions* have been widely discussed in the USSR for nearly two years now. The recent central committee plenum on agriculture was expected to clarify the issues involved and perhaps to recommend the adoption of this organizational form at some administrative level. Instead the final resolution adopted by the plenum merely acknowledged that some desire had been expressed for setting up inter-collective farm unions and instructed the central committee presidium to study the problems. 1/ No time limit was announced. It is possible that the whole scheme has now been set aside--as some commentators have suggested. 2/ However, it seems more likely that the presidium will endorse some form of union, particularly, to administer the rapidly expanding inter-collective farm activities.

Background

The present discussion of collective farm unions was initiated by Michael I. Kovalenko, a collective farm chairman from the Ukraine. Early in 1958 with the abolition of the Machine Tractor Station (MTS) system and the sale of farm machinery to the collectives local agricultural organization became a prominent topic for discussion in the central press. While agricultural inspectorates under the republic agricultural ministries and local party organs were expected to take over control functions formerly held by the machine tractor stations, opportunities for local organizational innovations were increased. This was particularly true with respect to relations between collective farms, a perennial legal question mark. On 9 March 1958 a letter from Kovalenko appeared in Pravda urging rayon and oblast councils to direct the economic work of the collective farms be established with membership elected on the basis of one representative per ten collective farmers. These councils were to have a staff of specialists including both a chief agronomist and a zootechnician and would have departments for production, construction and supply. 3/

In the debate which followed, critics of the councils insisted that they would be in the way of the other local agricultural administrations, create parallelisms in management, and undermine local party initiative in agricultural matters. 4/ Others alternatively suggested that departments of agriculture be created in the local party executive committees and a staff of agricultural specialists be placed under the committee's chairman. 5/

The well-known Soviet economist S. Strumilin contributed a long article to the debate in which he suggested that collective farms, on their own initiative, federate within the boundaries of each republic and then within the USSR as a whole to form a single all-union system. Primarily Strumilin was concerned about farm amalgamation which had been going on at a rapid rate since 1950. He viewed the federation scheme as a correct alternative to the danger inherent in

* Various terms have been used in discussing unions: e.g. soyuz (union); obedineniye (union or society); and soviet (council). An association at the local level is termed either an obedineniye or a soviet. The term soyuz apparently can be used interchangeably to refer to a local association or to the prospective system as a whole.

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amalgamation--the danger of attempting agricultural management on too large a scale. Collectives in a union system could pool their extra resources to the best advantage; create insurance funds both for crop protection and social security; organize mutual assistance programs for modernizing the poorer farms; take over local supply and centralized marketing for the collective farms. 6/

In June 1958, the Soviet journalist Ivan Vinnichenko, well known for his forecast of the MTS reform, complained that individual collective farms were "extraordinarily isolated in matters of common interest," seconded Strumilin's proposals for collective farm unions, and noted "the necessity of expanding cooperative links between the collective farms."

According to Vinnichenko, the Unions would operate on income deductions from the collective farm's production. Procurement plans which often failed to recognize individual farm conditions would be developed by rayon unions in close touch with the farms themselves, and then coordinated with the state plan at higher levels. The staffs of the republic agriculture ministries and oblast agricultural administrations would be cut by at least three times. Finally, the work of the unions would be coordinated with that of the sovnarkhozes to create "a single system for administering the country's whole economy." 7/

In mid-1958 it was suggested that the voluntary nature of the yet-to-be created unions would be preserved by electing a central council at the Third All-Union Collective Farmer's Congress then scheduled to meet early in 1959. This congress was not held and no new date for it has been announced. 8/

Developments in the Countryside

In the meantime the need for new legal and organizational norms has become increasingly more acute. Since the death of Stalin, farm profits have risen and the resources of the collectives have expanded accordingly. The indivisible fund, the communal portion of farm capital, has become the source of ventures outside the narrow limits of investment directly associated with farm production. This is true both within the farm and between farms where such diverse enterprises as brick kilns and radio stations have been developed jointly. None of these inter-collective activities have a solid legal basis. 9/ While their rapid proliferation this past year has been lauded by the state as progressive and conducive to the eventual goal of one form of agriculture in the Soviet Union, they have not been clearly tied in with local administration. Some enterprises have gotten into serious financial difficulties and overall they are at organizational loose ends. 10/

As early as June of last year it was noted that 20 different kinds of inter-collective organizations had developed independently of active government sponsorship or authority. 11/ Most of these, however, can be defined as production--not administrative--enterprises. On the other hand, early in October 1959 the newspaper Soviet Russia discussed the operation of "Regional Collective Farm Councils" and noted that these were springing up in many areas throughout the USSR. The article implied that a system of unions--like those envisioned by Strumilin and others--might be developed in the future based on these councils. 12/ As late as 4 January 1960 councils were being organized in the Ukraine as administrative amalgamations of inter-collective enterprises. 13/

January 1960

CIA/RR-CB 60-5

Page 3

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIALPlenum Stand

Two of the major speakers at the plenum came out strongly in favor of collective farm unions. D. S. Polyansky, premier of the RSFSR, spoke approvingly of suggestions that unions be organized through the republic level to provide a new system of collective farm leadership. The unions according to Polyansky would assume "operational leadership" of the collective, strengthen inter-collective ties, create insurance funds, and render assistance to backward farms. Polyansky was bluntly critical of the Ministry of Agriculture. He stated that present agricultural organs poorly grasp and weakly manage the activities of inter-collective enterprises. According to Polyansky, the adoption of unions would lead to an overhaul and reduction of the ministry and its organs, which would "only be to the good." 14/ N. Podgorny, Ukrainian Communist party leader recommended conclusive settlement of the union question. 15/

In his report, V. V. Matskevich, USSR Minister of Agriculture, noted that the solution to the problems created by the birth of inter-collective enterprises could not be put off. He admitted that unions could be organized satisfactorily at the rayon level but warned that any organizational device above that level should be the concern of the national economy and hence must include also the state farms. 16/

Khrushchev's plenum statement on the subject was notably brief. He revealed that at the time of the abolition of the MTS the Central Committee had given serious attention to the question of collective farm unions and had come to a decision not then to create "any organizations of the type of a collective farm center." Khrushchev noted that, with the recent growth of inter-collective farm relationships, there was again talk of the necessity of finding new organizational forms. He agreed that serious thought should be given to inter-collective farm organizations in the rayons, but that "to create a collective farm center would not be appropriate."

Khrushchev evidently was referring to the All-Union Council of Collectives, which existed from 1927 to 1932 and was known as the "collective farm center." Under this "center" were collective farm unions at the republic, krai, oblast, and rayon levels. At the local level these unions supervised the organizational, production, and technical functions of the collective farms and assisted in the formation of new collectives. Planning functions were retained by the USSR Commissariat of Agriculture and its subsidiary organs throughout this period. With the creation of the MTS the "center" system was abolished. 18/

Khrushchev's remarks indicate that at the time of the abolition of the MTS an official decision was reached that no new organizational structure would be created to replace the machine tractor stations in directing the work of the collective farms. Evidently, the question has been raised again by those who want collective farm unions which would provide operational direction from above and feel that an efficient operation of the farms--in line with national interests--requires such a structure. It is implicit, however, from Khrushchev's present statement that the original decision has now been reaffirmed.

Conclusions

1. As a minimum official program some form of association at the rayon level to administer the inter-collective movement is a

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likely development in the near future. Meanwhile associations at the rayon level will probably continue to be organized in a semi-official fashion.

2. A union at the national level with a maximum program of regulating collective farms and providing a variety of social and economic services may be a later development; however, party leadership seems presently opposed to it.

3. Presidium decisions in favor of some form of association may result in amendments in the Model Charter of 1935, the official constitution of collective farms. Formal action on the question may await the convocation of a Collective Farmers' Congress.

4. Any action in favor of the associations will be publicized as more democracy for collective farmers and a move toward the higher form intended to replace both collective and state ownership--i.e. all national ownership.

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Next 3 Page(s) In Document Exempt